

NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS SERVICE

INTRODUCTION

The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) is a key information agency within the Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission area of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Statistical data on U.S. agriculture are essential for the orderly development of production and marketing decisions by farmers, ranchers, and other agribusinesses. The U.S. food and fiber system totals over 14 percent of the gross domestic product and employs more than one out of every six employees in the United States. Agricultural data series are also important for monitoring the ever-changing agricultural sector to make and carry out agricultural policy relating to farm program legislation, commodity loan and insurance programs, foreign trade, the environment, agricultural research, rural development, and related activities.

The foundation of NASS began with the establishment of USDA in 1862. Agricultural supply information was one of the purposes for the new Department. The first official report on the condition of crops began in July 1863. The basic, mission-oriented program continues today in the USDA forecasts and estimates provided by the NASS Agricultural Statistics Board. NASS' responsibilities are authorized under the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946 and other sections under Title 7 U.S.C.

Appropriations for the Census of Agriculture were transferred from the Department of Commerce to the Department of Agriculture for FY 1997. NASS thereby assumed responsibility for the 1997 agricultural census and subsequent censuses. On February 2, 1997, Census Bureau employees working primarily on the Census of Agriculture were transferred into a new division within NASS.

The agency staff includes about 1,350 full-time Federal and State employees, one-third at Headquarters and two-thirds in the field. The NASS program utilizes 45 State Statistical Offices (SSO's) serving all 50 States. These SSO's are operated under cooperative funding arrangements with State departments of agriculture and/or land-grant universities. This arrangement efficiently serves the agricultural data needs at both the State and Federal levels, eliminates duplication of effort, provides State input, maintains national consistency, and minimizes overall costs to Federal and State governments. NASS also performs important reimbursable survey work for other Federal, State, and producer organizations as well as providing technical assistance for agricultural statistics programs in developing countries.

Thousands of farmers, ranchers, agribusinesses, and others voluntarily respond to nationwide surveys about crops, livestock, prices, and other agricultural activities. These surveys are supplemented by field observations, objective yield counts and measurements, and administrative data to provide reliable information. Annually, estimates for about 120 crops and 45 livestock items are published in approximately 350 reports prepared by NASS's Agricultural Statistics Board. In addition, the sample survey capabilities of NASS make it especially well suited to meet information needs for rural environmental and economic data.

The structure of farming and of the agricultural industry has changed dramatically since the initial crop reports were issued over 130 years ago. However, the need for accurate, timely, and impartial statistical information on the Nation's agriculture has become even more important as the Nation has moved from subsistence agriculture to a highly industrialized agricultural industry producing food and fiber for the world market.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COORDINATION

As the primary statistical agency for the USDA, NASS services the data needs of many agencies inside and outside of the Department. This interaction contributed significantly to the NASS strategic plan. NASS data are an important part of the World Supply and Demand Estimates that measure total world supplies and demand. The NASS data play a very important role in the Department's purchases of food for the school lunch program. USDA relies on NASS data for important policy issues such as the Export Enhancement Program, and the management of the Conservation Reserve Program. NASS data are used administratively to establish Federal Market Order milk prices which ultimately determine the price every consumer pays for milk and dairy products. USDA uses NASS data to administer the crop insurance program. Wage rate data from the labor survey are used by the Department of Labor to set the adverse effect wage rates. Grazing fees for publicly owned land are set using a formula based on NASS estimates of grazing fees on private land along with prices received data. The grazing fees are jointly administered by the Forest Service in USDA and the Department of the Interior.

Partnerships have been in place with State departments of agriculture and land-grant universities through cooperative agreements since 1917 to ensure statistical service meets State and local as well as national needs without duplication of effort. This coordination maximizes benefits while minimizing costs to the taxpayers. We also consider the thousands of voluntary data suppliers as partners in the important task of monitoring the nation's agricultural output, facilitating orderly and efficient markets, and measuring the economic health of those in agriculture.

NASS uses numerous forums to obtain feedback relating to program content and customer service. NASS has sponsored Data User Meetings for many years. These meetings are a primary source of customer feedback that keep the estimating program on track with the needs of the user community. This feedback played a vital role in developing the original strategic plan. Subsequent meetings have featured the NASS strategic plan as a means of generating discussion of the NASS program and the plans themselves. The reassignment of the Census of Agriculture in 1996 brought with it the Census Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics which continues to provide guidance for the census. Also, the mission area has formed a National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board which provides input for all REE agencies. In early 1997, the mission area sponsored a stakeholders meeting to evaluate the strategic plans of REE and the four agencies. Feedback from all of these forums have shaped the current NASS strategic plan.

KEY EXTERNAL FACTORS

Customers and stakeholders identified the following trends and external factors as having important implications for the NASS program in the next decade:

- Continued concentration in agricultural production, leading to fewer, larger, and more vertically integrated farms
- Declining voluntary cooperation as requests for information increase
- Rising expectations from the public for accuracy, timeliness, and relevancy of statistics
- Fewer employees with a background and education in agriculture
- Changing lifestyles in rural America, including more off-farm work, and a decline in the share that agriculture represents in rural communities
- Explosive changes in information technology
- An increasing need for sharing of information across agencies
- Rising demands among users to provide new kinds of information faster and in different forms

MISSION

The NASS mission is to serve the basic agricultural and rural data needs of the people of the United States, those working in agriculture, and those living in rural communities by objectively providing important, usable, and accurate statistical information and services for informed decision making.

GOALS

The NASS goals are consistent with those of the other agencies in the Research, Education and Economics mission area. They also fully support the goals of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. NASS's specific objectives describe the agency's contribution to the general goals. Basic data supplied by NASS provide the information necessary for informed decision making by public officials and private interests. These decisions will ultimately determine the success in achieving desired outcomes.

GOAL 1: Through research and education, empower the agricultural system with knowledge that will improve domestic production, processing and marketing to successfully compete in the global market.

Objective 1.1: Describe U.S. agriculture as fully as possible, providing timely and accurate agricultural statistics that are used throughout the agricultural sector to evaluate supplies and determine competitive prices for world marketing of U.S. commodities.

Time Frame for Completion: Periodically throughout each year.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct surveys to provide important data regarding supplies and prices of agricultural commodities.
- Issue timely and accurate reports that are useful for the efficient and effective marketing of U.S. agricultural outputs.
- Systematically review each step of data collection, processing, and estimation of production and price statistics to improve quality and timeliness.
- Use the Agricultural Statistics Board to assure objective evaluation of survey indications and to provide unbiased official USDA estimates.
- Examine the relevancy of statistical products by profiling the content, scope, frequency, and coverage provided compared to user needs.
- Produce official estimates on the dates and times specified in data formats most useful to data users.

Performance Measures

- National production statistics will annually cover 99 percent of all agricultural cash receipts in the National Income Accounts.
- Over 90 percent of data users rate production and price data series as important or essential to the marketing of agricultural products.
- NASS reports are complete and contain no data errors in 99 percent of releases.

Objective 1.2: Promote a level playing field in production agriculture with impartial statistics available to all at a predetermined and publicized date and time.

Time Frame for Completion: Continuous.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Evaluate trends and changes in production agriculture and adjust NASS statistics program accordingly.
- Present NASS statistics at the finest level of detail supportable by the data available.
- Promote public awareness of the importance of U.S. agriculture and of the NASS role in monitoring the Nation's food supply.
- Publicize NASS release policy and annual release calendar to emphasize fair treatment to all.
- Ensure that the estimation program and security procedures will safeguard official statistics from improper disclosure and protect impartiality.

Performance Measures

- The report release schedule is published for all to see before beginning an annual program cycle.
- There are zero instances of impropriety regarding data security prior to the appointed date and time of an official release.
- Scheduled due dates for official reports are met 100 percent of the time.

GOAL 2: Ensure an adequate food and fiber supply and promote food safety through improved detection, surveillance, prevention, and education.

Objective 2.1: Provide meaningful statistical projections that enable the producers and the marketing channels to minimize economic risk and provide food security for consumers.

Time Frame for Completion: Periodically throughout each year.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct surveys and field visits to enable the Agricultural Statistics Board to forecast crop yields and livestock productive capacity for a meaningful period into the future.
- Provide important data on management practices and economics which are useful for decision making and risk assessment.
- Design programs to permit quick reaction to emergency data needs such as those resulting from floods, droughts, and freezes.

Performance Measures

- NASS data are rated as important or essential to forecasting, market analysis, and risk assessment by 90 percent of agricultural leaders.
- NASS responds to all special requests and emergency data needs within its budgetary capability.

Objective 2.2: Provide important data on pre- and post-harvest chemical applications for informed evaluations of risk potential associated with using or discontinuing chemicals relative to both food safety and food security.

Time Frame for Completion: Periodically as needed for monitoring purposes.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct surveys to provide needed data on types and amounts of chemicals applied by producers and associated economic information to evaluate related economic importance.
- Initiate a program to measure and report chemicals applied to agricultural products during storage, packing, and shipping.
- Make meaningful data readily available to all who need the chemical use information for business and policy decisions.

Performance Measures

- Over 90 percent of customers rate chemical use data series and data products as relevant or highly relevant to environmental analysis and risk assessment.
- NASS meets 100 percent of legislated and funded data requirements for chemical use statistics.

GOAL 3: Foster a healthy and well-nourished population having the knowledge, desire, and means to make health-promoting choices.

Objective 3.1: Provide statistical advice, consultation, and services to USDA and State agencies concerned with health, nutrition, and education when seeking new data or the statistical analysis of existing data for policy decisions.

Time Frame for Completion: As needed.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Maintain contacts and visibility as a competent and reliable source of statistical expertise and survey capabilities.
- Work closely with customers to ensure statistical needs are met.

Performance Measure

- More than 90 percent of clients in the health, nutrition, and education areas show ratings of satisfied or very satisfied with NASS statistical services.

GOAL 4: Enhance the quality of the environment through a better understanding of and building on agriculture's and forestry's complex links with soil, water, air, and biotic resources.

Objective 4.1: Provide statistical data on agricultural chemical use, production practices, land productivity and integrated pest management practices so proper decisions can be made regarding stewardship of America's rural resources and the environment.

Time Frame for Completion: Periodically as needed for monitoring purposes.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct surveys to provide needed information concerning quantities of chemicals applied to agricultural commodities.
- Supply important information on land use and productivity for use in environmental monitoring efforts.
- Supply important economic information relevant to policy and production decisions associated with chemical use and integrated pest management on U.S. farms and ranches.
- Supply information relevant to measuring the adoption of integrated pest management practices in production agriculture.

Performance Measures

- More than 90 percent of data users working on agriculture and the environment are satisfied or very satisfied with NASS data on chemical usage, production practices, and integrated pest management activities.

GOAL 5: Empower people and communities, through research-based information and education, to address the economic and social problems facing our youth, families, and communities.

Objective 5.1: Provide detailed data from the Census of Agriculture at specified intervals to facilitate locality based policy and business decisions benefiting farmers, ranchers, and rural residents.

Time Frame for Completion: 5-year intervals.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct the Census of Agriculture to provide detailed data at local levels on the characteristics of America's agricultural sector.
- Improve coverage of minority farm operators in the Census of Agriculture.
- Report the results of the Census in timely and user-friendly manner to enable decision making concerning localities across the U.S.

Performance Measures

- The 1997 Census of Agriculture will maintain the current definition of a farm while improving coverage and making the data available in their entirety earlier than previous censuses.
- The 1997 Census of Agriculture will have improved coverage of minority-operated farms compared to previous censuses.
- Point of contact customer demand for census data will be documented.

Objective 5.2: Provide necessary and sufficient economic data on prices, labor, cost of production, farm numbers and farm income to enable informed policy decisions to benefit farmers, ranchers, and rural residents.

Time Frame for Completion: Periodically throughout each year.

Strategies for Achieving the Objective

- Conduct surveys to monitor the economic status of those who operate and work the Nation's farms and ranches and provide needed data for policy analysis.
- Involve State cooperators and local program supporters in program development and evaluation.

Performance Measures

- Over 90 percent of data users rate NASS agricultural economic data as important or very important to their work.
- Over 90 percent of reimbursable clients requesting farm economics and rural economics data are satisfied or very satisfied with NASS statistical services and data.

MANAGEMENT INITIATIVES

These management initiatives are considered essential for the effective utilization of human and physical resources to carry out the NASS mission. Emphasis is on: 1) customer service; 2) benefits derived from employee diversity, training and career satisfaction; and 3) productivity accruing from information technology, communications, and administrative support for resource management. NASS initiatives are in accordance with Departmental standards.

Management Initiative 1: Strive to meet customer needs and expectations.

Time Frame for Completion: Continuous.

Strategies for Achieving the Management Initiative

- Meet the requirements of the September 1993 Executive Order regarding a customer service plan.
- Investigate new ways to continue dialogue between NASS and data users.
- Improve customer awareness concerning NASS products and services and facilitate easy access to official NASS data.

- Introduce new products and services and redesign existing products to meet changing customer expectations.
- Enhance NASS publications by adding more information, graphics, and map products.
- Generate new spatial products based on geo-referenced files and remote sensing products.
- Be responsive to new data needs for specific components of the agricultural economy (e.g., county-level data, watershed data, rural data, data on subgroups in agriculture, environmental data, data on sustainable agriculture, etc.).

Performance Measures

- Over 90 percent of data users surveyed are satisfied or very satisfied with NASS service.
- NASS responds to customer requests within 2 working days 99 percent of the time.
- New data products and services are introduced to fulfill customer requests.

Management Initiative 2: Employ a diversified and technically competent staff. Treat employees fairly and with respect.

Time Frame for Completion: Continuous.

Strategies for Achieving the Management Initiative

- Support cooperative programs with 1890 land-grant, Hispanic, Native American, and other minority educational institutions to assist them in training and to help NASS recruit qualified minorities.
- Utilize and promote student assistants, cooperative students, stay-in-school and other employment programs that assist in recruitment of highly qualified, diversified, and technically competent staff.
- Maintain a healthy and safe environment for employees, with modern equipment and comfortable furnishings. Make effective use of flexible work schedules and work locations.
- Develop innovative and flexible training programs to meet individual needs. Offer and encourage statistics, computer, and communication skills training. Promote staff knowledge in the full range of agricultural and rural issues. Build experiences and versatility through staff mobility.
- Participate in national and international forums where concepts and methodologies are presented. Utilize cooperative agreements, exchange programs, contracts, and other interactive vehicles with academic, professional, and subject matter experts to expand staff capabilities.
- Conduct an organizational climate survey at regular intervals and take action on issues identified.
- Recognize outstanding contributions by NASS employees.
- Promote trust, teamwork, and communication. Involve the staff at all levels in program decisions.

Performance Measures

- All program needs are met and NASS meets Department guidelines regarding diversity in staff.
- Organization climate surveys show fewer than 15 percent of employees have low morale.
- Zero substantiated EEO complaints are filed by NASS employees.
- 100 percent of NASS managers have had 80 hours or more of management/leadership training.

Management Initiative 3: Ensure an effective information resource management system that maximizes productive capability and facilitates communication for employees.

Time Frame for Completion: Continuous.

Strategies for Achieving the Management Initiative

- Move to distributed client/server computing using relational data base technology.
- Increase use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), remote sensing, and geo-referencing devices.
- Use the USDA wide-area communications network to implement new functions such as remote LAN management, video conferencing, document archiving and retrieval systems, GIS, and data sharing.
- Organize all relevant data into a series of data warehouses which can be accessed and shared through powerful analysis tools. When appropriate, these data sets should contribute key components to the USDA data architecture.
- Upgrade all field LAN servers to enhance the system capacity to handle over 300,000 computer-assisted telephone interviews.
- Upgrade all LAN systems to 32-bit architecture to facilitate the migration to the USDA Technical Architecture.
- Work closely with the ARS Administrative and Financial Management Division to make sure administrative and financial services to NASS are efficient, effective, and consistent with Departmental standards and guidance.

Performance Measures

- No report due dates are missed because of equipment failure.
- Less than 10 percent of employees cite lack of quality equipment as a negative work factor.
- Eighty percent of NASS managers give a favorable rating to information and administrative systems.

LINKAGE OF GOALS TO ANNUAL PERFORMANCE PLAN

The NASS annual performance plans will draw upon performance measures described in this strategic plan to monitor progress toward NASS objectives in support of the general goals. These measures gauge how well the basic statistical data for agriculture provided by NASS meets the needs of both public and private decision makers. Their actions, based on information available to them, will ultimately determine the success of the goals and outcomes desired by NASS, REE, and USDA.

Goals 1, 2, and 4 are linked to the Agricultural Estimates and Statistical Research and Service budget program activities. Goal 5 is linked to the following budget program activities: Agricultural Census, Agricultural Estimates, and Statistical Research and Service. Goal 3 is supported through the NASS reimbursable program.

LINKAGE OF GOALS TO THE DEPARTMENTAL GOALS

The USDA has identified three strategic goals as the critical concerns to be addressed through the various agencies of the Department. The goals of NASS are consistent with those of the other REE agencies and support the three goals of the Department as follows:

- USDA Goal I: Expand economic and trade opportunities for agricultural producers and other rural residents. Supported by NASS Goals 1 and 5.
- USDA Goal II: Ensure food for the hungry, and a safe, affordable, nutritious, and accessible food supply. Supported by NASS Goals 2 and 3.
- USDA Goal III: Promote sensible management of our natural resources. Supported by NASS Goal 4.

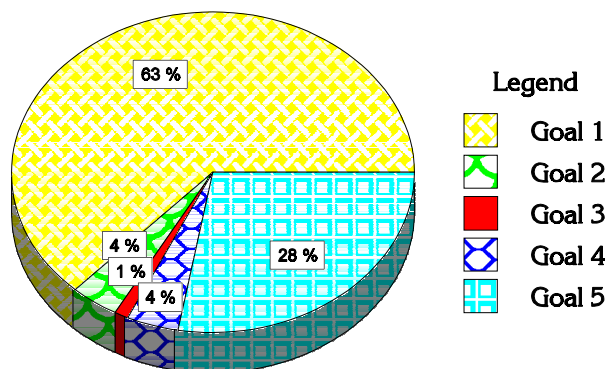
RESOURCES NEEDED

Resource allocations for NASS in FY1997 are shown in the following chart as they apply to achievement of the five desired goals.

Highly skilled employees are required by NASS in the areas of agricultural statistics, survey methodology, mathematical statistics, computer sciences, and technical and general support. In addition, trained interviewers under contract to NASS are critical to accomplish stated goals. Personnel are dependent upon reliable computer equipment and networks for the completion of their duties. Periodic adjustments to the budget for pay increases and inflation are necessary to sustain service levels expected by data users. Significant changes from previous resource demands resulted from the transfer of the Census of Agriculture from the Bureau of the Census to NASS and to meet new data requirements on Integrated Pest Management and Postharvest Pesticide Use.

In the long term, NASS resource needs are influenced by several major factors. The Census of Agriculture collects and provides comprehensive data every 5 years on all aspects of the agricultural economy. Because of this cyclical schedule, different activities are conducted each year which require varying resources. Over time, NASS plans to integrate Census of Agriculture activities into NASS's ongoing statistical programs. Attainment of NASS's performance measure of producing statistics which cover 99 percent of all agricultural production receipts and responding to changes in the agricultural sector which result in different data needs will require NASS to secure resources for those areas currently under served. Finally, NASS will continue to be in a constant state of re-engineering due to changes in methodology and technology. NASS's ongoing efforts to streamline information management to increase the efficiency, timeliness, and accessibility of information will require resources which are difficult to estimate due to the rapid changes in technology and changing costs for hardware and software.

Resource Allocations for NASS in FY 1997



PROGRAM EVALUATION

The assessment of NASS performance, under its strategic plan, is highly dependent on the judgement of data users and customers as to the value and relevance of its products and services. For example, NASS statistics contribute to the orderly function of production and marketing systems in the agricultural sector. Timeliness is easily measured by the percent of pre-announced due dates met, but the degree to which NASS contributes to the outcome of an efficient market is in the judgement of the data user. NASS will obtain these judgements through customer satisfaction surveys conducted in a periodic basis. These would be aligned with the annual budget and performance planning cycle. Other assessments of NASS contributions toward the desired outcomes specified in this and the REE strategic plan will be solicited from subject matter experts, such as public and private economists, the media, farmers, and ranchers.

For many years NASS has held data user “listening” sessions in various locations around the U.S. In addition, NASS periodically solicits technical and program reviews by economic and statistical experts from academia and other data knowledgeable organizations. Input from these sources had significant impact on this strategic plan and these program evaluations will continue to shape future NASS strategic planning. NASS has learned through continuous interaction with data users over the years about the increasing and changing needs for statistical information regarding agriculture and related issues.

ROLE OF EXTERNAL ENTITIES

A large number of people and organizations influence and are influenced by NASS’s activities. In order to determine how NASS could better serve these groups, it was necessary to identify the issues and concerns of the principal stakeholders. The results of the NASS interaction with these customers and other stakeholders are reflected in the plan. No paid contractors or consultants were used in the preparation of this strategic plan.